UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Fake news and the Dutch YouTube political debate space

Tuters, M.

Chapter Title: Fake news and the Dutch YouTube political debate space
Chapter Author(s): Marc Tuters

Book Title: The Politics of Social Media Manipulation
Book Editor(s): Richard Rogers, Sabine Niederer
Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2020)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1b0fvs5.9

7 Fake news and the Dutch YouTube political debate space

Marc Tuters[1]

Abstract

Fake news is a contested concept. In the wake of the Trump insurgency, it has been reclaimed by "hyperpartisan" news providers as a term of derision intended to expose perceived censorship and manipulation in the "mainstream media". As patterns of televisual news consumption have shifted over the past several years, YouTube has emerged as a primary source for "alternative" views on politics. Current debates have highlighted the apparent role of YouTube's recommendation algorithms in nudging viewers towards more extreme perspectives. Against this background, this chapter looks at how YouTube's algorithms frame a Dutch "political debate space". Beginning from Dutch political parties' YouTube channels, we find the existence of an "alternative media ecology" with a distinctly partisan political bias, the latter which is resonant with the populist-right critique of the mainstream media as the purveyors of "fake news".

Keywords: YouTube, hyperpartisan media, right-wing populism, comment culture, Forum voor Democratie

Introduction: YouTube as radicalizing platform

On 1 February 2019, *de Volkskrant* and *De Correspondent* published a much-anticipated report on YouTube as a radicalization platform: 'Leidt het algoritme van YouTube je naar extreme content?' (Translated: Does the YouTube algorithm lead you to extreme content?) (Bahare et al., 2019).

Drawing on data analysis produced by some of the same authors of this current report, it sought to investigate the extent to which YouTube functioned as an engine for online 'radicalization' (Tufekci, 2018; Holt, 2017). As these and other reports claimed, YouTube appears to be playing a significant role in the development of a new antagonistic culture of debate, in which an 'alternative influence network' is said to have the capacity to shape public opinion, especially amongst a demographic of young and politically rightward leaning men (Lewis, 2018). Amongst the figures who have risen to prominence through this YouTube debate culture, is for example the now internationally well-known, Canadian academic psychologist Jordan Peterson. Peterson is often viewed as a conservative political figure, even as a member of the so-called 'alt-right' (Lynskey, 2018). This latter term, which stands for 'alternative right', gained popularity in the aftermath of the 2016 US election as a means of describing a seemingly new breed of conservative online activism that brought together a diverse array of actors united against the perceived hegemony of 'politically correct' liberal values, often through a jokey and transgressive style (Hawley, 2017; Heikkilä, 2017; Nagle, 2017). Whilst Peterson has refuted an association with the alt-right, in consulting how the YouTube algorithm itself categorizes Peterson it would appear that the platform nevertheless still views him in this light. How exactly this categorization works is inscrutable to all but the owners of the platform. And while it should not be taken as definitive proof of what a given channel is about, we can nevertheless assume that YouTube's categorization does reflect some essential aspect of its bottom line, which is to keep the most people watching for the longest time possible.

The present research report uses the same platform-centric categorization method as introduced above, applying it to studying the space of Dutch parliamentary political debate on YouTube. While initially motivated by the question of how this space engages with the issue of 'fake news', the report however moves away from defining fake news as disinformation (which is to say the deliberate manipulation of facts) towards conceiving of it in terms of a form of 'hyperpartisan' information as produced by 'openly ideological web operations' (Herrman, 2016). This latter conception of fake news is furthermore also resonant with the redefinition of the term as it has begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world in order to describe news organizations whose coverage they find 'disagreeable' (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017: 16) – notably by Donald Trump who often refers to 'establishment' media outlets such as CNN and the *New York Times* as fake news (Weisman, 2018). In the European context, where laws such as the German Netz DG have been passed at the national level rendering platforms

responsible for policing this problem, such critics have framed the attempt at regulating fake news as a 'blueprint' for state censorship (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017: 71). In spite of these controversies, the bewildering issue of fake news, entangled as it is together with broader changes in political and media spheres at a variety of levels, remains relatively understudied outside of the American context – the latter which is in many ways quite unique for a variety of factors (Benkler et al., 2018: 381-387).

Whilst the precise mechanisms of YouTube's algorithms are unknown, what is clear is that they are designed to optimize 'engagement,' defined in terms of 'views' as well as the number of 'comments', 'likes', and so forth (Covington et al., 2016). In recent years, YouTube's algorithm has been critiqued as creating a so-called 'rabbit-hole effect' (Holt, 2017), whereby the platform's algorithms, as mentioned above, have been accused of recommending ever more extreme content, in an effort to keep viewers engaged. It has thus been argued that this particular environment has helped to draw audiences from the mainstream towards the fringe. Along these lines, it has indeed been argued that, on YouTube, 'far-right ideologies such as ethnonationalism and anti-globalism seem to be spreading into subcultural spaces in which they were previously absent' (Marwick and Lewis, 2017: 45). Academic researchers exploring this phenomenon have, for instance, found that YouTube's 'recommendation algorithm' has a history of suggesting videos promoting bizarre conspiracy theories to channels with little or no political content (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2018). Beyond this current 'radicalization' thesis, for some years new media scholars have observed that YouTube appears to multiply extreme perspectives rather than facilitating an exchange or dialogue between them – as for instance observed in an earlier audience reception study of a polemical documentary produced by the Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders and published to YouTube (van Zoonen et al., 2011).

We may perhaps want to consider the growth of a new combative and conspiratorial culture of debate on YouTube, as documented by these more recent YouTube studies, in the context of broader global political shifts that have been picking up pace in the latter part of the 2010s, the latter which may be referred to under the umbrella term of 'national populism' (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Referred to as 'thin ideology' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), populism is characterized by a suspicion of the 'elite' as well as a purist notion of the 'general will' of the true people, the latter which is not necessarily equivalent to the democratic electorate (Muller, 2016). Recent new media scholarship has convincingly demonstrated how such populist anti-elite sentiment translated readily into an embrace of alternative news media,

particularly in the US context in which the rise of an 'alternative partisan news system' is said to have played a crucial role in the last presidential election (Benkler et al., 2018). While there exists right and left variants of the concept, right-wing populists tend to have an advantage in speaking to nationalist issues (Goodwin and Eatwell, 2018). In the analysis of political scientists Matthew Goodwin and Roger Eatwell, national populism can be characterized by four factors, that they call the 'four D's'. These are a *distrust* in the liberal 'establishment', the *destruction* of long-held communal identity owing to forces of globalization, the relative *deprivation* as 'neoliberal' economics leads to a rise in inequality and finally the political *de-alignment* from traditional political parties. Whatever the political valence of national populism going forward, Goodwin and Eatwell conclude that these four factors are destined to have 'a powerful effect on the politics of many Western countries for many years to come' (Goodwin and Eatwell, 2018).

Fakeness and hyperpartisanship

Thus far the problem of fake news has primarily been studied in the context of Anglo-American national populism, specifically the political communication surrounding the Brexit referendum and the insurgent Trump campaign and subsequent presidency. Furthermore, most current studies of fake news have tended to focus on the US context, where institutional trust levels in media and in the government are said to be at an all-time low (Edelman, 2018) and political polarization stands at an all-time high (boyd, 2017). In that context, it has been noted that the standard designation of 'fakeness', as a diagnosis to be remedied by 'fact-checking', fails to acknowledge a much more profound epistemological problem. As has long been argued in the literature on the sociology of scientific knowledge, 'facts' are better understood as products of negotiated settlements amongst domain experts (Latour and Woolgar, 1976). The atmosphere of general suspicion towards expertise that underpins the rise of national populism thus poses a fundamental epistemological problem. This same general atmosphere of suspicion furthermore works to undermine trust in professional media institutions as the arbiters of facts. It is argued that this particular context plays into an innate psychological tendency to seek out bias-confirming information.[2]

---

2   Indeed, from the social psychology perspective, 'fake news' would arguably represent a more 'natural' human preference than 'facts', insofar as the former more readily provides support that conforms to the 'moral foundations theory' of human values (see Haidt, 2012).

A leading scholar in the field recently posed the dilemma thusly: in the US, somewhere between '25 and 30 percent of Americans willingly and intentionally pay attention to media outlets that consistently tell that audience what it wants to hear, and *what that audience wants to hear is often untrue*' (Benkler et al., 2018: 367, emphasis added). In the aforementioned context, such scholars furthermore suggest that technocratic solutions designed to regulate and censor this fake news would be 'neither feasible nor normatively attractive as they would certainly generate heated protest from a large spectrum of the populace' (367). Even in less politically polarized contexts the problem of regulation is extremely challenging. It is not isolated cases of fake news that are at issue but the larger problem of what these scholars refer to as 'network propaganda', which constructs 'materially misleading' narratives from a tissue of facts (102). Because it is extremely difficult to establish 'ground truth', reliable technological solutions to the problem of fake news are thus unlikely at present (377).

In light of the former diagnosis, the empirical study below reframes the issue of 'fake news' in the Dutch-language YouTube space by profiling the emergence of a network of channels engaged in political debate and commentary. It conceptualizes elements of this network as hyperpartisan, in the sense that they are 'openly ideological web operations' (Hermann, 2016). Whilst marginal in comparison to mainstream Dutch news organizations these channels nevertheless appear highly engaging, at least from the perspective of the YouTube algorithm. As alternative news organizations almost all of these channels are unique to YouTube, making them 'natively digital objects' (Rogers, 2013: 1). The empirical research that follows is thus concerned with understanding how these channels work, what their issues are, how they 'do' Dutch national politics, and how they differ from the mainstream.

YouTube's 'related channels' and Dutch political space

Following the 'digital methods' approach (Rogers, 2013), 'the discussion that proceeds here can be considered as an endeavour to 'repurpose' YouTube as a research device by thinking along those lines that the platform makes available to the public. In particular the approach uses YouTube's 'related channel' algorithm as the basis for an analytical method that takes a set of Dutch alternative news channels as its primary site of study. As a forewarning, it is important to recognize the contrived or 'artificial conditions' with which the medium frames the object (Rieder et al., 2016: 3). These conditions effectively make it impossible for the digital methods researcher to identify where the medium ends and where in turn the social begins. Though we do have a sense

Figure 7.1   Related channels on YouTube. Table where the top row displays the name of each Dutch political party and the columns below each of these are the media organizations associated with each party's YouTube channel. 29 March 2019

Source: YouTube[3]

of how some of YouTube's algorithms work from both the official corporate statement (Press, 2019), as well as from attempts by scholars to 'reverse engineer' or 'teardown' the platform (Bessi et al., 2016), the precise functioning is unknown and in any case likely to change, thus frustrating the exact reproducibility of any of our findings. At any time, YouTube may furthermore suddenly and unaccountably change its algorithms, which are in any case invisible to all but certain engineers at YouTube. Needless to say, *the capriciousness of platforms* renders the effective control of variables practically impossible. Whilst the latter is axiomatic to digital methods it should also be recognized as an inherent limitation of the methods as well. For these reasons the present report is thus best approached as 'snapshots' of a milieu that is constantly in flux.

The empirical research focuses primarily on repurposing YouTube's 'related channels' for the purpose of analysis of the Dutch political space. In order to delineate what we are here calling the Dutch 'political debate space' in YouTube, we started from the channels corresponding to the Dutch political parties. Since all 13 Dutch national political parties currently in

3   Note that the Dutch labour party visualized on the far right of the graph did not return any related channels.

the parliament have a YouTube presence, we used these channels as a 'seed list', or set of starting points, for the subsequent research. Starting then from this seed list the first technique compares all of the channels that YouTube classified as related to those of the Dutch political parties. This particular approach to categorization in all likelihood involved no human oversight; rather, it should be understood as an artefact of how the algorithm 'values' the object, in relation to the aforementioned 'engagement' metrics. Following the digital methods approach, the analytical gambit here is that the channels that YouTube suggests may be treated as a measure of how the platform views those parties.[4]

The most unusual finding is that the algorithm relates one particular channel to almost all parties across the political spectrum: Forum voor Democratie (FvD). As a new 'Eurosceptic' party with a younger demographic than the established nationalist populist Partij Voor de Vrijheid (PVV), FvD and its agenda seem to dominate discussion in political debate in a network of 'alternative' channels discussed below, several of which YouTube relates to the parties, most notably 'TheLvkrijger'. Before going on to discuss these alternative news channels in detail, the next most striking finding here is how the algorithm seems to organize the political spectrum in relation to different 'establishment' news organizations. One cluster of parties is associated with CNN, ABC, NOS[5] and another around *De Telegraaf*, media organizations that may be considered as relative liberal and conservative/populist, respectively. While it is not necessarily easy to arrange the Dutch political parties on a left-right axis – as many smaller parties are more issue-based – it is worthy to note how the algorithm groups the Groen Links and Denk parties with centre-right and right-of-centre parties. In addition to *De Telegraaf*, the algorithm also relates all of the parties in this latter cluster to alternative Dutch news organization: Omroep PowNed, a public radio and TV broadcast renowned for its satirical news show, PowNews, which often ridicules politicians with provocative questions. In what follows we will categorize Omroep PowNed, along with *GeenStijl*, a blog popular for its similarly abrasive style, as members of the *established anti-establishment* alternative news organizations.

That the algorithm also relates the parties to a smattering of large Dutch commercial and public media channels (WNL, RTL Nieuws, NPO Radio 1,

---

4   One should note here that social media use machine learning for predictive consumption in which 'success' is a measure of how correctly the algorithm predicts what a user will engage with. A well-known critique here is the notion of the 'filter bubble' (Pariser, 2011), which argues that algorithmic categorization can have the effect of narrowing the range of alternate viewpoints that one is exposed to.

5   Note that we removed most US channels from Dutch media network visualization below.

**Figure 7.2   TheLvkrijger post: Translated into English: 'He who is silent agrees!
   Don't shut up anymore! This is your country! Claim it!'**

Veronica Inside), is unsurprising as these would be an expected part of an
average Dutch media diet. What is likely surprising to those unfamiliar with the
Dutch political space in YouTube is the network of alternative or 'alt' channels
that YouTube relates to the parties, notably the aforementioned 'TheLvkrijger',
but also 'Arnews', 'Leukste YouTube fragmenten', 'Lissauer' and 'Rafiek de
Bruin.' With the possible exception of 'Arnews', all of these channels could be
categorized as 'openly ideological web operations'. As we will see, these Dutch
political debate channels are 'natively digital objects […] "born" in the new
medium' (Rogers, 2013: 19), as opposed, for example to Omroep PowNed. While
some of these channels, like TheLvkrijger, are transparently partisan, national
populist sentiments seem common in this space, as for example captured in a
post by TheLvkrijger encouraging viewers to vote in the upcoming elections,
which featured the slogan 'He who is silent agrees! This is your country! Claim it'.

The Dutch YouTube media sphere

In an effort to create a panoramic graph of the larger Dutch YouTube media
sphere that would also remain connected to the Dutch political sphere on
the platform we used YouTube's related channels algorithm to 'snowball' out
from the seed list of the 13 parties to 3 degrees of relations. We subsequently
visualized the related channel network with network analysis software,

Figure 7.3   Related channels on YouTube. Panoramic graph of larger Dutch YouTube media sphere. This graph was produced two months apart on 29 March 2019 and again on 22 May 2019 with identical outcomes.
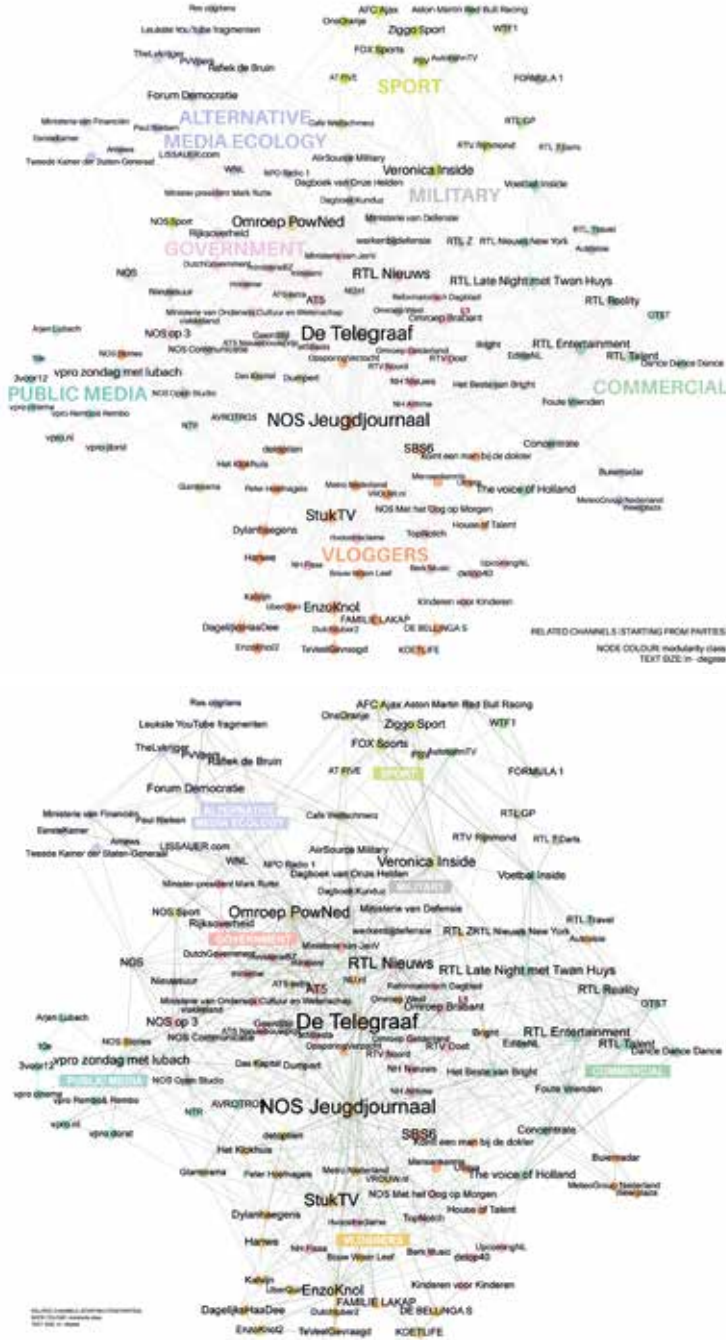
Visualization by Federica Bardelli using Gephi (Basian et al., 2009)

where nodes represent channels and edges represent relations according to YouTube's algorithm. The size of the text represents a measure of their relative importance within the network. Finally, relative similarity between channels determines their colouration, clusters which we have then labelled as *government*, *military*, *commercial*, *vlog*, *public*, *sport* and, finally, our specific *alternative media ecology.* The largest nodes in the graph are all 'establishment' media organizations with NOS Jeugdjournaal, RTL Nieuws and *De Telegraaf* at the centre. Slightly outside of the centre another large node is the established, anti-establishment channel Omroep PowNed, known once again for its 'edgy' confrontational style of reportage. If one continues along this same line one encounters the cluster labelled *alternative media ecology* at the centre of which the most connected node is FvD but which also includes a few government channels (for example Eerste Kamer) as well as a number of the aforementioned 'alt' political debate channels which we encountered earlier (for example 'Leukste YouTube Fragmenten'). In the next steps of the analysis we will delve more deeply into these 'alt' debate channels by performing some qualitative analyses of their content.

In both the panoramic map as well as in the prior analysis (based on only a single degree of relations to the seed list), we find the presence of a number of 'natively digital' political debate channels, such as 'Leukste YouTube Fragmenten' and TheLvkrijger. In considering these channels as a type of mini-genre, we can thus compare their style and how they 'do' Dutch politics. At the outset it should be noted that, by certain measures, some of these channels appear quite marginal. 'TheLvkrijger', for example, which YouTube related to half the parties, only has 6.5 thousand subscribers. CNN, which YouTube also related to half the parties, has 6.5 million subscribers. The Dutch political space on YouTube is not that large, however, and in any case, despite differing by orders of magnitude, YouTube related channels algorithm places CNN and 'TheLvkrijger' on the same footing. One degree of relations gives us a collection of 'alt' political debate channels including 'TheLvkrijger', 'Leukste YouTube Fragmenten', 'Rafiek de Bruin', 'LISSAUER.COM', 'Res Cogitans', 'Omroep PowNed', 'Arnews', to which we can add a few more by exploring their relations including 'GeenStijl', 'AllePolitiek' and 'Deweycheatumnhowe'. In analyzing their style, we can observe that 'TheLvkrijger', 'Leukste YouTube Fragmenten', 'Rafiek de Bruin', 'AllePolitiek' and 'Deweycheatumnhowe' are all of a sort, in that all post debate clips or interviews. Furthermore, sites as 'Arnews' and 'LISSAUER' use 'meme' graphics – a style also employed, and in fact pioneered to an extent, by PowNed and *GeenStijl*. Somewhat like Omroep PowNed in style, *GeenStijl* is famed for its provocative anti-PC tone. Settled in the Dutch media landscape (and with PowNed receiving

structural funds from the government), they can thus fairly be labelled as 'established anti-establishment'. Using clickbait tactics to attract attention, with the notable exception of AllePolitiek, the aim of these channels seems to be to amplify dissensus in the Dutch political space. Whilst this of course stands in marked contrast to the country's long history of consensus politics, where one normatively stands on this depends on one's democratic political theory. Furthermore, whilst several channels are transparently partisan, what is remarkable is that the majority of the most viewed videos in most of the channels focuses on figures from the FvD and PVV.

To provide a synoptic view of the natively digital debate channels' issues one can look at the most commonly used words in the titles of all of the channels in the form of 'word clouds' with words colour-coded and sized by frequency. Those appearing in black are issues such as referendum, climate agreement, dividend tax and Brexit, whist those in colour are the names of parties and their spokespeople. At first glance, what one notices is that 'Arnews' and 'AllePolitiek' appear primarily issue driven, whilst the other channels seem more engaged with Dutch political personalities. One can also observe the relative similarity between 'ResCogitans' and 'Leukste YouTube Fragmenten', as channels that both appear partisan towards FvD – on closer inspection this is indeed the case (and in fact they even appear to be run by the same person). Similarly, 'TheLvkrijger' appears to be partisan towards the PVV, which is also the case on closer inspection. As with the thumbnails, discussed above, the names of the figures from both these parties commonly appear in all these channels video titles. Further scrutiny reveals all of these channels to be at least somewhat sensationalistic, with 'Arnews', often using terms like heated debate ('verhit debat') in order to describe content. The more partisan of the channels follow an antagonistic logic when commenting on parliamentary debates, identifying the winner or loser of a given debate, at times resembling a debate genre familiar on YouTube, for example in videos featuring Jordan Peterson, often labelled in the style: *Jordan Peterson DESTROYS so and so*.

Alongside the related channels findings, the fact that official Dutch parliament channels, along with Forum voor Democratie (but not the other Dutch political parties), are clustered alongside these 'alt' debate channels seems peculiar. Given the aforementioned capriciousness of platforms, might these findings be attributable to an *excited algorithm* in the aftermath of FvD's surprising success in the senate elections? If so, then one would expect these findings to differ when reproduced at another point in time, either revealing an underlying stable state of network composition or else another excited state. With this question in mind we reproduced these first two methods, that were initially explored prior to the provincial (senate)

Figure 7.4   Thumbnail diagram of the 'fringe channels" top ten most popular videos
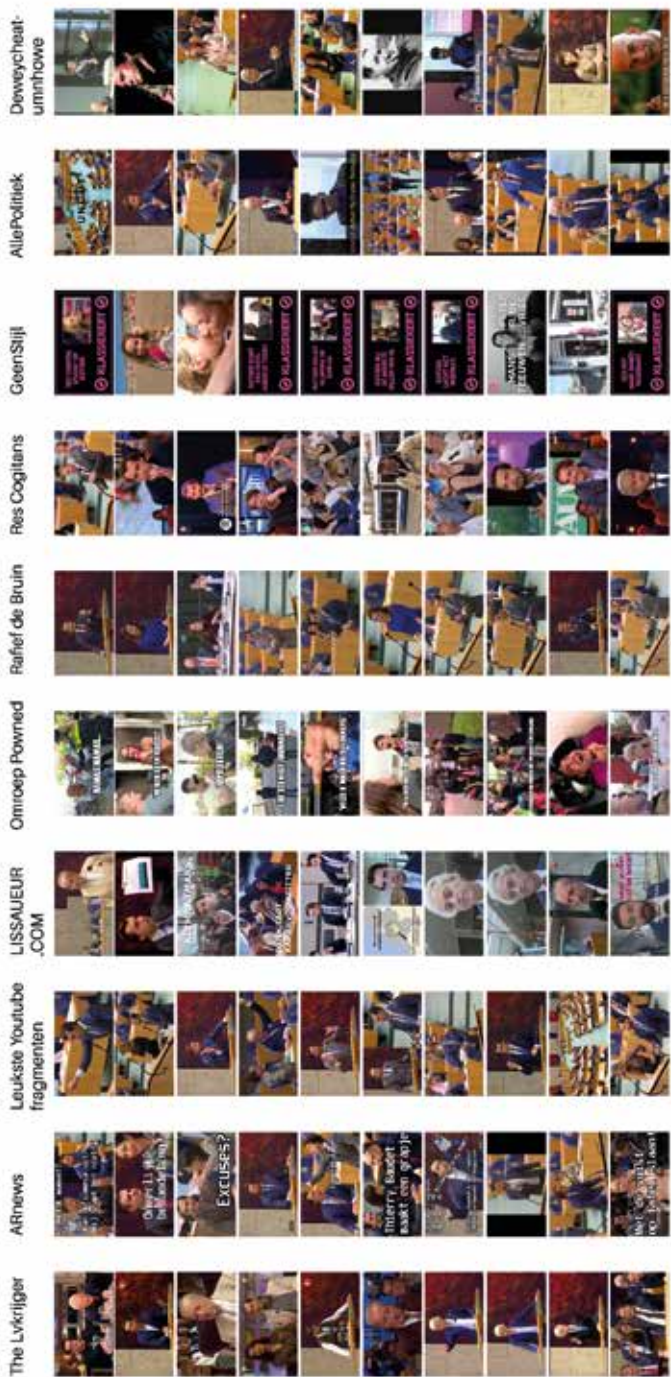
TOP 10 MOST POPULAR VIDEOS AMONG THE RELATED NEWS ORGANIZATIONS CHANNELS

Visualization by Federica Bardelli

Figure 7.5 Screenshot from the 'About' page on Cafe Weltschmertz's YouTube channel which includes a sarcastic 'trigger warning' for viewers who might be angered by its frank approach to political debate, as well as crypto-normative espousal of 'democratic hygiene processes'[7]

election, at the time of the EU parliamentary elections. Remarkably, we found no substantial difference in either the channels that YouTube considered as related to the parties (see Appendix 7.1). Moreover, the panoramic graph remained *identical*,[6] suggesting that it may thus reflect an underlying stable state of how the algorithm currently categorizes the larger Dutch YouTube media sphere (see Figure 7.3). Because the EU elections did involve several other parties, we did however identify the presence of two new clusters in the panoramic graph: one of which, associated with the new pan-European Volt party, floats on its own completely disconnected from the overall network; and another, associated with Dutch Pirate Party, which is connected to the larger network via a channel 'talking-head chat show' called 'Cafe Weltschmertz'. In close proximity to the alternative media ecosystem discussed above, Cafe Weltschmertz seems to frame its political debates in a *tendentious style* similar to some of the channels profiled above – referring to its approach, for example, as 'politically incorrect'. In this same cluster we also however find leftist investigative journalism channels including 'Follow the Money' and *De Correspondent* as well as the expected channels focused on the issue of privacy, 'Bits of Freedom', 'Privacy First' and finally a debate channel called 'Potkaars Podcast' featuring a video on its front page, entitled 'Potkaars praat met iedereen' (Potkaars speaks with everybody). In light of our subsequent discussion of fake news as a topic of debate, the video's description is worth quoting at length: 'If you want real news, you have to cut through the smoke -smoke & mirrors- to get to information and demand a controllable government. Dismissing information as 'fake news' is easy. But what do you replace it with?'

---

6 YouTube disabled the related video feature shortly after we completed this analysis (YouTube, 2019).

On fake news as issue

The final analysis concerns how channels in the Dutch political space 'do' the one issue in particular: fake news. We begin with a video from 'TheLvkrijger' of PVV representative Martin Bosma confronting the government minister of Internal Affairs, Kajsa Ollongren in a Tweede Kamer debate on the fake news that became central to her portfolio. In the video Bosma accuses Ollongren of 'playing a strange game' with 'what is truthful and what is not'. Bosma points to a fundamental lack of consensus of what's at issue in the fake news controversy more generally as well as alleging that Ollongren has seemingly tended to change her own definition of what constitutes fake news in order to suit her political purposes. When examining the comment section below this video we see commenters echoing Bosma's sentiments and questioning Ollongren's integrity, expressing the need for a concrete definition of fake news (45 likes). Commenters furthermore speak of Dutch public broadcasting as fake news that does 'nothing but mislead citizens' (78 likes).[8] This latter use of the concept of fake news echoes Trump's use of the term as means of attacking the establishment media.

Another video of interest, also published by 'TheLvkrijger', features a PVV-organized populist-type debate with pundits on the topic of fake news ('nepnieuws') and the European Union. Similar to the aforementioned Trumpian framing of fake news, the debate discusses the supposedly left-wing bias in the establishment media, as represented in one participant's statement that 'media serve the ideology of the establishment'. Again, we see positive reception in the comment section where a commenter writes about the Dutch public broadcaster 'NOS = FAKE NEWS', and advocates viewers to seek their news from alternative sources on YT.[9]

In another video on the topic, this time published by *GeenStijl*, a reporter asks politicians leaving the Tweede Kamer about the issue of 'fake news'. This time the reporter's questioning revolves around proposed European

---

7   Without offering any analysis of this particular unique term, for reasons of brevity and focus, it is nevertheless worth noting here that one of the signature accomplishments of some of the American alternative partisan news system, especially those on the far-right, has been to introduce new terminology in the hopes of normalizing certain formerly radical conceptual frames (Hatewatch Staff, 2015; Benkler et al., 2018: 128-132). In political punditry this technique is sometimes called 'opening the Overton window' (Marwick and Lewis, 2017: 11)

8   The number of likes on a comment can be treated here as a measure of agreement with these sentiments expressed therein.

9   This theme of framing of 'NOS is fake news' and 'NOS is left-wing propaganda' came up in multiple comments of multiple videos.

Figure 7.6 Weighted word lists of the titles of all the videos from the political commentary channels
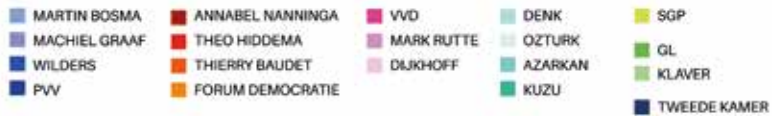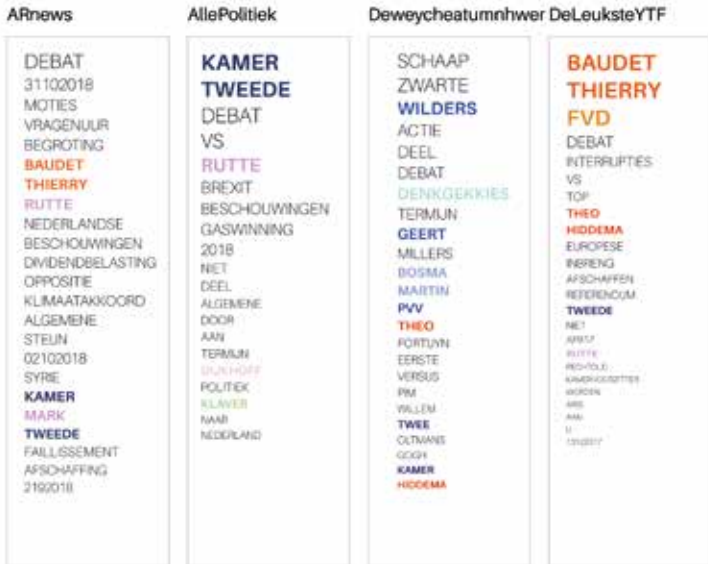
Visualization by Federica Bardelli

**Figure 7.7   Screenshot of a comment under the video of 'Leukste YT Fragmenten',
referring to a 'hopeless debate' and the lack of consensus on the
definition of 'nepnieuws'**

legislation, rather than Ollongren's engagement with the issue. As per the
channel's provocative style, the video does not hide its partisan stance on the
issue, titling the video: 'Brussels is censoring free speech'. Again, representa-
tive Bosma appears, this time with an attack on liberal political correctness
emanating from the liberal technocrats in Brussels, stating 'everything
that is not politically correct will be tackled'.[10] By contrast other politicians
interviewed by the journalist see the necessity of government action in
response to the 'crisis' of fake news. In the comments section multiple com-
menters reiterate the theme of the Dutch Government itself being 'fake news'.

A video published on 'Leukste YouTube Fragmenten' features a Tweede
Kamer debate fragment, once again on the concept of freedom of speech, this
time by FvD leader Thierry Baudet. In this clip Baudet makes a sophisticated
conceptual point on the alethiological (the study of truth). Using logic, Baudet
tries to refute Ollongren's concept of fake news as fallacious. He argues that
if for an atheist god is not true, then that would not make preaching a form
of disinformation. Based on this argument he then claims that Ollongren
would 'accuse the teachings of Catholicism of being untrue' and thus 'a form
of disinformation'. After his sophistry, Baudet then goes on to make the point
that state actors should *not* be allowed to decide what is true and what is
not true. 'You cannot trust the state', he says, what 'we need', he argues is
'free press'. In the comments section commenters state that all politicians,
besides Baudet, define fake news subjectively in particular falling back on the
Russian 'evil actor' narrative, which a commenter characterized as 'Orwellian'.

Although our analysis in the report did not include any left-of-centre
Dutch political commentators, this is not to say that they do not exist on
YouTube. Rather, the methods we used did not bring them to the fore. Indeed,
alongside the 'alt' channels profiled above we can in fact find a video of Arjen
Lubach's Zondag met Lubach, the VPRO broadcast in which the commentator,

10   Political correctness is a very popular straw man amongst 'dark intellectual web' figures
like Jordan Peterson on the right (Weiss 2018), but also left-wing figures such as Slavoj Žižek.

as with the one on the Green Style video, critiques the Russian 'evil actor' narrative. In Lubach's opinion the real threat is in fact an alt-right conspiracy theory, in the style of Pizzagate, which Russian actors merely amplify.

Conclusions: Left-leaning bias?

Academics are often accused by conservatives of having a left-leaning bias; indeed, apparently evidence reflects these allegations (Abrams, 2016). This narrative of 'liberal bias' has been one of the central themes of the American new right, extending from contemporary 'neo-reactionaries' (Malice 2019), to 1990's 'culture warriors' (Nagle 2017), and back to the 1960's 'messengers of the right', who pioneered new media formats in order to disseminate their message (Hemmer 2016). And whilst accusations of such perceived liberal bias may be offered against this report, the fact remains that we came by the data underlying our findings by merely following the platform and the way that it categorized the Dutch political parties. In doing so we identified a series of 'alternative' debate channels many of which appeared hyperpartisan – following Hermann's initial definition of the concept as 'openly ideological web operations'. If we were to locate the political bias of these 'alternative' political debate channels in relation to 'establishment' media organizations in the Netherlands, then many would seem to be roughly aligned with the conservative and populist tone of *De Telegraaf*. Closer still to the antagonistic debate style that we observed in many of these channels is the transgressive style of reportage pioneered by the 'established anti-establishment' of *GeenStijl* and Omroep PowNed.

   The Netherlands is also well known for having innovated new media formats, notably reality TV. Additionally, one might also say that the Netherlands has been innovative in developing new positions and issues on the right – notably the issue of homo-nationalism (Aydemir 2011). What we may however also be seeing in this research is the possible emergence of US-style right-wing punditry in the Dutch sphere. While it still seems marginal in the current 'alternative' debate space on YouTube space, exemplary here is the channel of 'Paul Nielsen' (24,531 subscriptions), an English language Dutch 'alt-lite' channel which features such titles as: 'NOS is the Dutch CNN | Biased News in Holland' and 'How Marxists took over the Netherlands'. The site claims to be endorsed by Prof. Dr. Paul Cliteur, expert witness at Geert Wilders' hate speech trial and Ph.D. supervisor to Thierry Baudet. This channel may be a bridging node to the figures in what has been called YouTube's 'dark intellectual web' (Weiss, 2018) or its 'alternative influence network' (Lewis, 2018), such as for

example Stephan Molyneux who features a video with the title: 'The Truth About Immigration and Crime in the NL'. At the same time, in scrutinizing a network one should be careful of the guilt by association fallacy. The point is rather to acknowledge the proximity to an active and controversial area of debate within the platform.

While the possible intervention of 'Russian trolls' as a factor in 2016 US elections has been convincingly made (Jamieson, 2018), the Dutch case is different. In addition to the absence of an Anglo-American 'first-past-the-post' electoral system there is a very different media ecosystem in the Netherlands, which for example still has a much higher trust in the general 'establishment' than in the US (Edelman, 2018). Furthermore, as opposed to the 'neutrality' axiom that has characterized 20th-century US news media, Dutch news media have always been partisan. This having been said what we see in YouTube suggests the emergence of a hyperpartisan Dutch new media political space. Currently it is mostly dominated by one party, but other parties may take this as a challenge. Insofar as YouTube represents a media source in the Netherlands, especially for youth, the Dutch YouTube 'alt' political debate space may represent a re-politicization of youth, which runs counter to neoliberalism's historical project of pre-emptive depoliticization (Foucault, 2008). If political pluralism advocates peaceful coexistence of different interests the combative and anti-politically correct tone of much of political debate on YouTube may militate against this. Can the long tradition of consensus in Dutch culture be brought to bear on this new debate culture or is the Netherlands on the path to Americanized Trump-style polarization? In terms of final takeaways, we can say that an inquiry into fake news, which defines the latter as the deliberate manipulations of facts, must also consider the inherently problematic aspects of this very conception as well. For this reason, regulating disinformation can be portrayed as Orwellian 'thought control', which in turn resonates with populists' anti-establishment, conspiratorial frameworks.

References

Aydemir, Murat (2011) *Dutch Homonationalism and Intersectionality*, ARC-GS Lecture, https://arcgs.uva.nl/videos/video-artikelen/dutch-homonationalismand-intersectionality.html?1556011447190

Bahara, Hassan, Annieke Kranenberg and Dimitri Tokmetzis (2019) 'Leidt het Algoritme van Youtube je Naar Extreme Content?', *de Volkskrant*, 11 February, https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/leidt-het-algoritme-vanyoutube-je-naar-extreme-content~bea101e3/

Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts (2018) *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bessi, Alessandro et al. (2016) 'Users Polarization on Facebook and Youtube', *PLoS ONE*, (11)8, pp. 1-13. Open WorldCat, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0159641.

boyd, danah (2017) 'Did Media Literacy Backfire?', *Data & Society Points*, 5 January, https://points.datasociety.net/did-media-literacy-backfijire-7418c084d88d

Eatwell, Roger, and Matthew Goodwin (2018) *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. London: Penguin Books.

Edelman (2018) *2018 Edelman Trust Barometer*. https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/fijiles/aatuss191/fijiles/2018-10/Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Employee_Experience_2018_0.pdf

Foucault, Michel (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France, 1978-1979*, Edited by Michel Senellart, Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Herrman, John (2016) 'Inside Facebook's (Totally Insane, Unintentionally Gigantic, Hyperpartisan) Political-Media Machine.' *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 August, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/28/magazine/inside-facebookstotally-insane-unintentionally-gigantic-hyperpartisan-political-media-machine.html.

Holt, Jared (2017) 'White Supremacy Figured Out How to Become YouTube Famous', *Right Wing Watch*, October. http://www.rightwingwatch.org/report/white-supremacy-fijigured-out-how-to-become-youtube-famous/.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall (2018) *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kaiser, Jonas and Adrian Rauchfleisch (2018) 'Unite the Right? How YouTube's Recommendation Algorithm Connects the U.S. Far-Right.' *Data & Society Media Manipulation*, 11 April. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199641260.001.0001/acprof-9780199641260.

Lewis, Rebecca (2018) 'Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube,' *Data & Society*. https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DS_Alternative_Influence.pdf.

Lynskey, Dorian (2018) 'How Dangerous Is Jordan B Peterson, the Rightwing Professor Who 'Hit a Hornets' Nest'?' *The Guardian*, 7 February. https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/how-dangerous-is-jordan-b-petersonthe-rightwing-professor-who-hit-a-hornets-nest.

Mudde, Cas and Crist.bal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Muller, Jan-Werner (2016) *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pariser, Eli (2011) *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You.* New York: Penguin.

'Press – YouTube'. YouTube, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/yt/about/press/.

Rieder, Bernhard et al. (2016) 'Data Critique and Analytical Opportunities for Very Large Facebook Pages. Lessons Learned from Exploring "We Are All Khaled Said"'. *Big Data & Society* 2(2), pp. 1-22.

Rogers, Richard (2013) Digital Methods. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Tufekci, Zeynep (2018) 'YouTube, the Great Radicalizer', *New York Times,* 10 March. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html.

Wardle, Claire and Hossein Derakhshan (2017) 'Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making', Council of Europe. 27 September.

Weisman, Jonathan (2018) (((*Semitism*)))*: Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Weiss, Ben (2018) 'Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web', *New York Times*, 8 May. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/opinion/intellectualdark-web.html.

About the author

Marc Tuters is Assistant Professor in New Media & Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam. He has graduate degrees from Concordia (Canada) and the University of Southern California (USA), and has worked as an artist and researcher in organizations including the Annenberg Centre, the Banff Centre, National University of Singapore, and Waseda University.

Appendix 7.1

Figure 7.8   Related channels on YouTube, 22 May 2019

Table where the top row displays the name of each Dutch political party who ran candidates in the EU election. As with Figure 7.1, the columns below each of these are the media organizations associated with each party's YouTube channel. The related channels for the parties are identical to Figure 7.1 apart from a few minor differences and the fact that D66 now no longer returns any related channels, as with PvdA. Note also that of the two EU parties that return channels are categorized quite differently than the other national Dutch political parties. Source: YouTube.